

Defiant, Blenheim and Havoc Aces



MARK BOSTLETHWAITE

Andrew Thomas



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A FLAWED CONCEPT

I cut him off with Red Section and gave the order “No 1 attack. GO!” As he turned he dived down to the ground, forcing me to change over with No 3 to the starboard side. I could see my air gunner’s bullets hitting the aircraft, which finally crashed in a field full of cows, bordered by dykes, at 1415 hrs.’

With these words, written in the late afternoon of 12 May 1940, Sqn Ldr Philip Hunter, who was flying with LAC Fred King, described the destruction of a Ju 88 for No 264 Sqn’s first victory. Within moments Flt Lt Nicholas Cooke, with his gunner Cpl Albert Lippett, leading Yellow Section was also in action;

‘One He 111 was sighted at 3000 ft. Enemy dived towards the ground. I used +12 lb boost and caught the enemy on the port side at the same level. I carried out a “Defiant Cross-over” attack. Smoke then issued from both engines and I saw the enemy make a crash landing in a cloud of dust.’

The Boulton Paul Defiant – the RAF’s newest fighter – had been blooded over the Dutch city of The Hague by two sections from No 264 Sqn that had been sent to patrol the area following the commencement of the *Blitzkrieg* in the west 48 hours earlier. It was to be the start of a seesaw of highs and lows for the unit over the next few months.

At the start of World War 2 in September 1939, RAF Fighter Command possessed 28 squadrons of Hurricanes and Spitfires. A new single-engined monoplane fighter was also about to enter service, although the Defiant was very different in concept to the other types. Additionally, there remained several squadrons still flying biplane

Defiant L6973/PS-A forms the backdrop to a group of No 264 Sqn aircrew at the time of the Dunkirk evacuation. It was the personal aircraft of the CO, Sqn Ldr Philip Hunter, who was flying the fighter near The Hague on 12 May 1940 when he claimed the Defiant’s very first victory (via Alec Brew)



Gladiators, and no fewer than seven equipped with the Blenheim IF – a converted twin-engined bomber used in the long-range fighter role.

The Defiant was the ultimate manifestation of a genre that had its roots in the successful employment of the two-seat Bristol F 2 Fighter during World War 1, although this aeroplane had only begun to achieve its remarkable success when flown as a traditional single-seater scout, but with the advantage of having the observer to cover the tail. The two-seat fighter concept saw further use in the shapely form of the Hawker Demon during the 1930s, primarily because of the outstanding performance of the Rolls-Royce Kestrel-powered Hart bomber from which it had been developed.

To replace the Demon, Specification F9/35 was issued, and amongst other manufacturers Hawker proposed a Merlin-powered fighter based on its Henley light bomber. Named Hotspur, it was fitted with a power-operated gun turret – a similar configuration to the submission by the Boulton Paul Company, which had been developing power-operated gun turrets throughout the 1930s. The company's design – also Merlin powered – was named Defiant and was of a similar size to the Hurricane, albeit some 1500 lb heavier.

However, the root cause of the problems that later afflicted the turret fighter lay in Spec F9/35 itself, which specified that the design was to concentrate all of its armament in the power-operated turret and have no forward-firing machine guns. Thus in any action the pilot always had to consider the field of fire of the gunner. In part to allow Hawker to concentrate on its other work, Boulton Paul was eventually awarded a contract for two prototypes, the first of which made its maiden flight from Wolverhampton on 11 August 1937 – four months after an initial production contract for 87 had been placed. The clean lines of the prototype were marred when the turret was added, which with the gunner and ammunition contributed almost ten percent of the fully loaded weight of the aircraft. The Defiant was intended to supplement the single-seaters as a 'bomber-destroyer', but events were to prove that in a modern conflict this was a flawed concept.

With war clouds looming at the time of the Munich Crisis of September 1938, the replacement of the biplane Demon with more modern equipment became urgent. Two months later, at the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE), a Blenheim IF was fitted with a trial installation of an under-fuselage gun pack containing four Browning machine guns. Test firings were completed at the RAE's Martlesham Heath facility. Following the trials the first of almost 150 Blenheims were modified for the long-range fighter role at Nos 24 and 27 Maintenance Units. Thus equipped, the aircraft were re-designated Blenheim IFs.

The first of these new 'fighters' were delivered to No 25 Sqn at Hawkinge and No 23 Sqn at Wittering in December 1938. Blenheim IFs soon reached No 64 Sqn at Church Fenton too, this unit being fully equipped by mid-January 1939, as was Digby-based No 29 Sqn. Posted to the latter unit at the same time was Plt Off Bob Braham who, like many other future nightfighting aces, honed his skills on the Blenheim IF in the last months of peace.

In January 1939 the three Auxiliary Air Force Demon units based in the London area – Nos 600, 601 and 604 Sqns – also began receiving



The immaculate Sqn Ldr Philip Hunter was No 264 Sqn's inspirational leader until his death in action on 24 August 1940. He was also the first pilot to become an ace flying the Defiant (via Alec Brew)

Among the young future aces that cut their teeth on the Blenheim fighter was Flg Off John Cunningham of No 604 Sqn, who later became one of the RAF's most successful nightfighter pilots (author's collection)





Blenheim IFs. Flying with the latter unit was a youthful Plt Off John Cunningham, who would also soon rise to prominence as a nightfighting ace, while among No 601 Sqn's pilots was Flg Off Carl Davis – subsequently to become the first American-born ace of World War 2 – and Flt Lt Roger Bushell. A qualified barrister, Bushell was captured early in the conflict and later became 'Big X' of 'Great Escape' fame, only to die at the hands of the Gestapo.

EARLY OPERATIONS

On the outbreak of war the RAF had no specialised nightfighter units, so the Blenheim IF fighter squadrons were allocated this additional duty. A period of intense night training commenced. Amid great secrecy, trials had been proceeding on an airborne intercept (AI) radar, and No 25 Sqn received its first four AI-equipped Mk IFs in August 1939. The mysterious 'black boxes' of the AI radar were fitted amidships, with aerials on the nose and wings, the whole installation weighing 600 lb. Sgt Dickie Haine recalled;

'These early radar sets were painstakingly assembled, and began to arrive for fitting to the Blenheims. One flight of the squadron was given the task of carrying out trials and calibration of the equipment and training the radar operators.'

A handful of radar-equipped Blenheim IFs were also later issued to No 604 Sqn, the Fighter Interception Unit at Tangmere and the Special Duties Flight (SDF) at Martlesham Heath, allowing technical and tactical trials to continue through the winter of 1939-40. A few days before the outbreak of war No 25 Sqn had also received a number of longer range Blenheim IVFs.

On 3 September, with the war barely two hours old, Plt Off John Isaac of No 600 Sqn became the first Briton to die in the conflict when his Blenheim IF crashed near Hendon. Later that evening Blenheim IFs of No 601 Sqn, including one flown by future ace Flg Off Max Aitken, were scrambled to intercept a mysterious radio signal that turned out to be from a faulty refrigerator! To add insult to injury, the fighters were fired on by friendly anti-aircraft guns upon returning to base. No 25 Sqn's first operational sortie came the following day, and included Sgt Dickie Haine in ZK-J, who recalled;

From December 1939 through to the summer of 1940 Blenheim IF L8715/NG-R was regularly flown by Flg Off John Cunningham and his air gunner AC Jimmy Rawnsley. Among the other successful pilots that flew it was Plt Off Ian Joll (M J F Bowyer)

‘Not long after midnight on 4 September, the as yet unfamiliar sound of the air-raid sirens shattered the night air and one flight of the squadron was scrambled from Northolt and told to intercept an unidentified aircraft detected by ground radar. Our three aircraft, in close formation, climbed through thick overcast. Later, we realised that this was the first night defensive patrol of World War 2.’



Further north at Leuchars on the 18th, Hudson-equipped No 233 Sqn formed a fighter flight with the Blenheim IF for coastal protection duties. That day three of the Bristol fighters flew an offensive patrol over the sea to a point 90 miles east of Leuchars, despite the aircraft lacking any W/T or flotation gear! Further dedicated ‘coastal fighter’ squadrons formed in early 1940. And it was over the sea that most early operations were flown, with No 23 Sqn flying its first real mission on 30 October when two sections covered a force of Royal Navy destroyers patrolling 150 miles out in the North Sea. A few days later No 600 Sqn received its first AI-equipped Blenheim IVFs, which were immediately detached to Manston in the hope of catching the low-flying He 115 seaplanes that were laying mines in the Thames Estuary. No enemy aircraft were intercepted, let alone shot down.

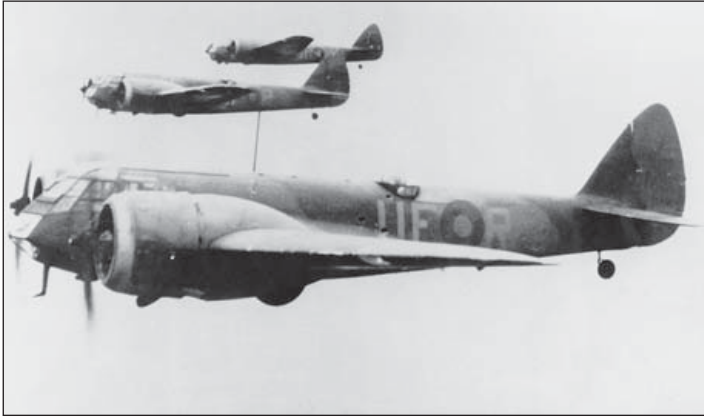
It was Nos 25 and 601 Sqns that had the distinction of being the first RAF fighter squadrons to undertake an offensive sortie over Germany when, on 28 November, the seaplane base at Borkum, in the Frisian Islands, was attacked. Led by Sqn Ldr J R Hallings-Pott of No 25 Sqn, the dozen Blenheims left Bircham Newton after refuelling at 1415 hrs, making a surprise attack shortly before 1530 hrs when seaplanes and installations were strafed – all the aircraft returned safely. Among those making their combat debuts were Flg Offs Sir Archie Hope, Carl Davis and Max Aitken of No 601 Sqn, all of whom would achieve considerable success, whilst No 25 Sqn’s contingent included Sgt Dickie Haine (L1408), who recalled;

‘All 12 Blenheims kept in fairly close formation as it was a murky winter afternoon, and we flew at only a few hundred feet above the dreary grey of the North Sea. An experienced and competent navigator flew with the CO in the lead aircraft. Right on ETA the Dutch coast emerged out of the mist, and a few minutes later we were able to identify the mole, crane and gantries of Borkum naval base. The squadrons opened out into wide echelon formation and dived down in turn, our four

In September 1939 Hudson-equipped No 233 Sqn at Leuchars formed a fighter flight with Blenheim IFs. These machines duly flew offensive fighter patrols some distance out over the North Sea without being fitted with either a radio or flotation gear. L8716/ZS-4 was photographed at Bircham Newton on 14 January 1940, just as the dedicated coastal fighter squadrons formed (RAF Bircham Newton records)

Blenheim IF L1437/ZK-P of No 25 Sqn was flown by Sqn Ldr Hallings-Pott when he led the successful strafe on the seaplane base at Borkum on 28 November 1939. This was the first offensive action undertaken by RAF fighters in World War 2 (Bristol via J D Oughton)





The Auxiliaries of No 601 Sqn contributed six Blenheim IFs to the Borkum raid, giving a combat debut to a number of future aces (author's collection)

Among the No 601 Sqn pilots on the Borkum raid was Flg Off Sir Archie Hope, who achieved numerous successes during the Battle of Britain and was later to command the unit (Ian Simpson)



Vickers guns, loaded with de Wilde incendiary ammunition, spraying the seaplanes, gun posts and installations. There was no doubt that complete surprise had been achieved, and there must have been quite a lot of damage done. Several seaplanes had been damaged and fires started.'

Earlier in the month No 264 Sqn had formed at Sutton Bridge under the leadership of Sqn Ldr S H Hardy, and on 5 November the first pilots arrived fresh from training,

among them future aces Plt Offs Terence Welsh, Michael Young and David 'Bull' Whitley. Two experienced pilots also arrived as flight commanders, including another future ace in the form of Flt Lt Nicholas Cooke. The unit's first Defiant was delivered on 5 December, and a few days later No 264 Sqn moved to Martlesham Heath alongside the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment to ease the type's entry into service. There, another future ace, Plt Off Eric Barwell, joined. He later described the impressions of his new mount;

'As far as the Defiant was concerned it was a beautiful machine to fly, being very stable and easy to handle, although it did have a higher landing speed than a Spitfire or Hurricane. I liked the Defiant – I was very happy with it really.'

By the beginning of 1940 further squadrons had been formed with Blenheim fighters, one being No 235 Sqn to which the only Blenheim ace, Plt Off Reg Peacock, was posted in late January. At Martlesham the Defiant trials continued, although expansion of the evaluation was frustrated by many teething problems. However, night flying finally began in February, and the Defiant's good forward visibility and broad track undercarriage made the fighter easier for landing at night than a Spitfire – a portent for the future.

At the end of March No 264 Sqn declared two flights operational and began convoy escort patrols over the North Sea from Bircham Newton. It also gained a new CO when Sqn Ldr Philip Hunter arrived, and under his dynamic leadership suitable tactics to weld the crew into a fighting team to exploit the strengths of the Defiant were developed. There followed a series of trials against bombers to evolve the best methods of attack. Hunter also flew a trial against a Spitfire to demonstrate that by circling and maintaining his speed it was possible to also counter an attack by a well flown single-seat fighter. Philip Hunter was considered to be a keen and efficient officer with a most charming personality, and No 264 Sqn soon became known as 'Hunter's Circus'.

As No 264 Sqn flew its first tentative operations, a second unit began to receive Defiants when No 141 Sqn's first example was delivered to Grangemouth, although it was not to be fully equipped until May. Then, on 10 May 1940, the German *Blitzkrieg* in the west began, catapulting No 264 Sqn's Defiants into a period of hectic action and a brief moment of glory.

A BLOODY SUMMER

On Friday, 10 May 1940, the Germans opened three simultaneous thrusts into France, Belgium and the Netherlands. On the latter front, the assault opened shortly before dawn, with attacks on airfields at Schiphol and Waalhaven by low-flying Luftwaffe bombers. Waalhaven then came under attack by paratroops dropped from waves of Ju 52/3ms, the Dutch having by then suffered heavy aircraft losses both in the air and on the ground.

Soon after the German assault was unleashed, Flg Off Reg Peacock led three Blenheim fighters from No 235 Sqn on an early morning patrol off Texel, Borkum and the Dutch Friesian Islands, which proved uneventful. However, there was action aplenty for six Blenheims from No 600 Sqn that had been led aloft by the unit CO, Sqn Ldr J Wells. Sent to counter the airborne landings near Rotterdam, they arrived overhead Waalhaven and immediately dived down to strafe the Junkers transports that had landed on the airfield. Several Ju 52/3ms were destroyed before the escorting Bf 110s from 3./ZG 1 intervened. A fierce dogfight ensued, with Wells being the first to fall. His aircraft was swiftly followed by four others, one of them flown by Plt Off Dickie Haine;

‘I was attacked as I climbed away from strafing the Ju 52/3ms. In the first attack a burst of cannon fire shattered the Perspex hood above my head, grazing my helmet and destroying the instrument panel in front of me. I started to weave sharply, but the next attack stopped my port engine and riddled the port wing. I dived down to low level but the attacks persisted, and yet another burst riddled my starboard wing and shot a few feet off the starboard propeller, setting up a horrible vibration. And then an extraordinary thing happened.

‘As I struggled to maintain control of the aircraft, an Me 109 flew alongside in close formation with my Blenheim. Either the German pilot thought we must be doomed anyway or he was out of ammunition and was just waiting for us to crash, but I was screaming at Kramer, my

The shattered remains of Blenheim IF L1514/BQ-N of No 600 Sqn sit on a Dutch mudbank following Plt Off Dickie Haine’s forced landing after his aircraft was shot up by a Bf 110 over Waalhaven on the first day of the German offensive, 10 May 1940 (R C Haine)

